

Senate Bill 197
February 5, 2013
Presented by Ron Aasheim
Senate Fish and Game Committee

Mr. Chairman and committee members, I am Ron Aasheim, Administrator of FWP's Communication and Education Division. I am here today as an informational witness.

In the way of background, in Montana individuals must be 12 years of age no later than January 16, of the year following the general hunting season in order to hunt. To carry or use a firearm in public a youth under 14 years of age must be accompanied by a person 18 years of age or older.

Approximately 6,500 individuals take hunter education in Montana each year. That number has remained relatively stable over the last several years. Those individuals are instructed by approximately 1,300 volunteer hunter education instructors.

In Montana anyone born after January 1, 1985 must complete a hunter education course prior to purchasing a hunting license.

SB 197 gets to the heart of an issue Montanan's last three legislatures have addressed, namely the best way to encourage young hunters to participate.

Different approaches are being taken across the country to encourage participation and recruitment. Those include:

- Lowering or eliminating the minimum hunting age;
- Making it easier and more convenient to meet hunter education requirements through shortened classes and online opportunities;
- Offering mentored opportunities without a hunter education requirement;
- Offering youth tailored hunting opportunities and;
- Offering reduced license prices.

Over the past several years, we have done a number of things in Montana to encourage youth participation. Those have included:

- Reduced prices and in some cases free licenses;
- Offering special hunting opportunities including early seasons and less restrictive licenses and season types.

In Montana, unlike in some states, there is no age limit or license required to hunt animals classified as non game such as rabbits, squirrels, fox and raccoon or coyotes which are classified as predators.

Research has shown that having early opportunities in the field is important in laying the foundation for a lifetime of hunting. The research is less clear on the best age to introduce youngsters to hunting, given differences in physical, mental and emotional maturity development. As it relates to killing game animals.

Questions that we consistently hear when discussing the issue include:

- Should there be a minimum age to hunt?
- Should the state or parents decide when a youngster is ready to hunt?
- Should there be limits on the species of animal allowed to be taken?
- Is a mentor an adequate substitute for a hunter education course?

Thank you Mr. Chairman, I'm available to answer questions.